E-Democracy and E-Economy in Africa

Sirkku K. Hellsten
University of Birmingham, UK

INTRODUCTION

A new world governance and economy characterised by globalisation has an increasing emphasis on knowledge and knowledge-transfer as the primary driver of economic growth, competitiveness, and participation. The economic, social, and political landscape in which future development will take place has then also changed. All countries, rich and poor, must now reconsider their approach to development to incorporate this new reality. Opportunities exist for poor countries to use information and communication technologies (ICT) to make rapid advances in their economic and political development, but there are also risks that a digital divide might widen the inequality between the "have's" and "have not's" across the world.

This article focuses on the role of ICT and the development of e-democracy and e-economy in Africa. The chapter will discuss the prospects and problems in enhancing e-democracy and e-economy in Africa by examining global and local obstacles to the access and use of ICT in many African countries. It also discusses whether ICT can empower people locally and regionally to participate more actively in politics, public affairs and economics.

BACKGROUND: ICT OPPORTUNITIES IN AFRICA

In the process of globalisation, democracy and economy are expected to go hand in hand. The spread of democratic political order across the world is closely tied to global economy that is based on free market capitalism. Both trends assume as well as promote free flow of information, global communication, exchange of knowledge, and free movement of production of goods and services as well as wide participation of civil society.

The spread of Internet into Africa, the mushrooming of cyber cafes in African cities and major towns, personal computers and mobile phones have created a virtual global village, in which information and knowledge from most parts of the globe is accessible at the click of the mouse. The ICT access numbers have come up rapidly. As an indicator five years again, only a handful of countries had local Internet access, now it is available in every capital city. In 1996 just in Africa only, about 700.000 people had access to the Internet. However, Tokyo had almost twice as many telephones lines than the whole African continent. During the year 2000, sub-Saharan Africa had already passed the threshold of one telephone per 100 inhabitants. In the same year also all the African countries become connected to the Internet. According to a report by the UN Information and Communication Technologies Task Force (UNICT, 2002) in September 2002, the proportion of Africans with Internet access has risen by 20% between January 2001 and 2002.

Interactive local, national, and global communication and dissemination of information and knowledge is central in building democracy, participation, and economic productivity. This is particularly important in poor countries that face serious global and domestic economic, geographical or political challenges. Domestic challenges can include, for instance, the promotion of sustainable development and the eradication of poverty; the access to and allocation of natural resources; prevention, management, and resolution of conflicts with the reinforcement of peace, security ad stability; the endorsement of popular participation in the development processes, democracy and good governance; as well as the promotion of human rights.

The global challenges, for their part, consist of the promotion of competitiveness in the global markets; the exigencies of the emerging information and knowledge based societies of the 21st century; the continuous scientific and technological changes, and the incessant flows of new ideas, views, experiences, and opinions of development and international cooperation. Access to the global networks of ideas, policies, and practices would enable African across the continent to be at least more aware of what is taking place in the world markets; and to help them to design strategies to improve their competitiveness. (Modiddin, 2002; see also Annan, 2003; UNESCO, 2002.)

Wider entrance to the global village and centres of power and decision-making would enhance Africa's opportunities to acquire the competitiveness needed to be credible producers in those markets. The lack of it will leave Africa marginalised in global political economy. However, access to the global networks and global mar-

kets requires certain capacities, a combination of highly qualified human resources and technical productive capacity which is equally highly specialised and costly (particularly in terms of the initial costs), given African meagre resources and the many competing alternative demands on African development. (Modiddin, 2002) New world economy has emerged over the last decade as two long-run broad and overlapping trends: globalisation and advances in information and communication technology have converged. In this new economy, knowledge has replaced traditional productivity inputs, such as labour and natural resources, as the primary ingredient for economic growth. This has created a landscape to which countries must adapt their economic policies as well as their governance. Through the process of globalisation, capitalism has become the dominant form of economic organisation across the globe resulting in free flows of trade and capital.

Recent advances in ICT have increased the knowledge intensity within the production process and economy is now characterised by "knowledge" as the major factor in production and comparative advance. This has caused structural and qualitative changes in world economy, which need to be recognised and incorporated in global and local development policies. As Matthew Clarke (2003) points out, we need to focus on achieving knowledge-intensive development or *e-development*. Within the new economy, information is unbundled from its physical carrier and economics can be separated from the economic of physical objects. De-materialised markets and the digitisation of production and consumption mean that development policies have to overcome the traditional barriers of natural resources and to maximise an environment for the efficient working of the new economy (Clarke, 2003, p. 6).

GLOBAL DIGITAL DIVIDE, E-ECONOMY, AND WORLD MARKETS

The new economy will not automatically end poverty, because poor countries lack the current type and amount of investment required to benefit from the new economy. Despite the fact that new telecommunication technology undeniably has advanced rapidly and more and more people around the globe have today direct access to it and to the information it conveys, there are still vast regions in the world which have either no or very limited access to these new means of communication and exchanging information. In fact, these places may have very restricted means for even local, let alone global, connections. Many regions lack even more traditional information channels such as mail, newspapers and books, telephone, television, or radio.

On the other hand, in many parts of the third world, and particularly in Africa, many of those countries, which now have the access to the ICT, have not succeeded in using it internally and internationally to promote local interests. Statistics show that even if the know-how and technology is already there and there are some signs of change, the distribution of the latest telecommunication technology is both globally and locally still very uneven. Of the approximately 816 million people in Africa in 2001, it is estimated that only 1 in 4 have radio (205 m), 1 in 13 have a TV (62m), 1 in 35 have a mobile phone (35m), 1 in 40 have a fixed phone line (20m), and 1 in 130 have a personal computer (5.9m). (UNECA, 2005). When we discuss the increasing numbers of Internet users, we should keep in mind that still it is only 0.2 per cent of Africa's population who actually has the access to Internet and that the lack of infrastructure and affordability has centralised these connections in the bigger cities and business centres. In 2000 there were only about 580 000 estimated regular Internet users in the LDCs, representing less than one per cent of the population and 0.16 per cent of global Internet Users. (See Molosi, 1999; Sarocco, 2002) Also in most African countries each computer with an Internet or e-mail connection usually supports a range of three to five users. This puts current estimates of the total number of African Internet users at around 5-8 million, with about 1.5-2.5 million outside of North and South Africa. This is about 1 user for every 25—400 people, compared to a world average of about one user for every 15 people, and a North American and European average of about one in every two people. (Figures for other developing regions in 2000 were: 1 in 30 for Latin America and the Caribbean, 1 in 250 for South Asia, 1 in 43 for East Asia, 1 in 166 for the Arab States). (The UNDP World Development Report, 2001).

While e-economy is to be promoted with e-democracy and e-development in general, it is important to notice that the obstacles in the access to information and knowledge are the same as the access to global markets in general. The lack of ICT in Africa is at least partly based on global economic inequalities. In most parts of Africa, the very same obstacles that we could overcome with the help of new information technology are the ones that prevent its widespread use in the poor parts of the world. Geographic isolation with no reliable means of transportation, lack of infrastructure together with lack of education and with severe poverty mean that there exists very few people who could use even the traditional communication channels, let alone the new technology. This entails that providers are charging high fees to make up for their investment costs. Because most private companies have to play according to the rules of market rationality, the service